

Improperly Discarded 'Sharps' Can Be Dangerous

Many people use needles, syringes and lancets—called “sharps”—to manage their medical conditions at home. These conditions include diabetes, allergies, infertility, arthritis, hepatitis, HIV, blood clotting disorders, migraines and cancer. Sharps are also used to give medication to pets and farm animals.

But the haphazard disposal of these devices is putting a lot of other people, including waste-disposal workers, housekeepers, family members and children, at risk of injury and serious infections.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has created a new web section with information about the safe disposal of needles and other sharps at www.fda.gov/safesharpsdisposal.

The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that 9 million people in the U.S. use sharps at home—that equates to more than 3 billion disposable needles and syringes and 900 million lancets each year.

Unfortunately, many sharps used outside of a doctor’s office or hospital are thrown in the household trash, and that’s hazardous.

FDA warns that:

- loose sharps should never be thrown away in household or public trash containers, toilets or recycling bins and
- a person who is accidentally pricked by a discarded sharp is at risk of exposure to such blood-borne viruses as hepatitis and HIV.



Message aimed at patients, caregivers

The California Sharps Coalition, a group of organizations focused on the safe disposal of sharps, told FDA it believes that most people hurt by

a discarded needle or other kind of sharp do not report the injury.

Even if injuries do not cause infection, they can have significant psychological and financial impact on the person who has to be tested and

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may wait days or weeks to know if he or she has contracted a disease, the group says.

Janesia R. Simmons, a public health advisor in FDA's Center for Devices and Radiological Health, says that people using sharps often do not know the safest way to dispose of them. "In addition, family members and other caregivers who are taking care of someone in their home may not know what to do," she says.

Simmons says FDA's message primarily targets patients and caregivers. The agency recommends that used sharps be immediately placed in a sharps disposal container. FDA-cleared sharps containers are generally available through pharmacies, medical supply companies, health care providers and online. These containers are made of puncture-resistant plastic with leak-resistant sides and bottom. They also have a tight fitting, puncture-resistant lid.

If an FDA-cleared container is not available, some organizations and community guidelines recommend

using a heavy-duty plastic household container, such as a laundry detergent container, as an alternative.

Disposing of sharps containers

There are a number of ways to safely dispose of the sharps containers. When the sharps disposal container is about three-quarters full, follow your community waste guidelines for disposing of the container. These guidelines vary depending on where you live. Local trash collection departments or health departments may have information about sharps disposal programs. In general they include:

- Drop boxes: Collection sites are located at doctors' offices, hospitals, pharmacies and police or fire stations.
- Hazardous waste sites: Public collection sites for hazardous materials (e.g., paints, cleaners and motor oil) may also accept sharps containers.
- Residential pickup programs: Some communities have pickup services for waste that includes sharps containers.

- Mail-back programs: The label on the container should have information on how to mail certain FDA-cleared sharps disposal containers to a collection site for proper disposal.

If you are accidentally stuck by another person's used sharp, FDA advises that you wash the exposed area promptly with water and soap or a skin disinfectant, (e.g. rubbing alcohol) and seek immediate medical attention. 

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